

Experiences of LGBTQ+ Protestant Christians in Ithaca, New York
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Abstract to be considered for an award:

Identifying as both LGBTQ+ and Christian can seem paradoxical. Some describe these two groups as having irreconcilable differences due to strict binaries, while others have found that being a person of faith and queer to be deeply Christian. These strict binaries are made evident in the tensions that frequently exist between these two communities. In 2013, the Pew Research Center found that 44% of LGBTQ+ individuals see Protestant Christian communities as unfriendly.¹ On the other hand, the recent decision of the United Methodist Church to emphasize its opposition to gay clergy and same-sex marriage aligns with the same 2013 study that showed 59% of white evangelical Protestants and 50% of black Protestants oppose same-sex marriage.² The experience of identifying as both LGBTQ+ and Christian is located amidst the cultural or social norms in both of these communities, the politics through which both communities define themselves and exist, and various intersections of identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, ability etc. It is within these contexts that individuals who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Christian may experience a range of stressors that can be emotional, psychological, and even physical.

The central question is: How do individuals who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Protestant Christian navigate and negotiate the intersection of their identity and communities? The focus on the Protestant denomination is categorical, as a distinction from other Christian denominations such as Catholic and Orthodox. That being stated, using the category of Protestant is not without challenges, due to the great diversity within this denomination. Many branches within Protestantism have vastly different polities and cultures. I also use the term LGBTQ+ broadly and interchangeably with other terms, recognizing that some individuals may identify less with the LGBTQ+ community and rather with other terms such as “same-sex attraction” etc.

The goal of this study is to illuminate the complex cultural and political tensions that many LGBTQ+ Protestants navigate daily because of their strong ties to these two identities. Through an anonymous online survey, interviews, literature review, participant observation and maintaining a fieldnote journal as a reflexive space—this research highlights the experiences of these intersections. A secondary goal of the project is to provide a deeper context to the experiences between LGBTQ+ and Protestant communities, through which future research projects may build upon. More specifically, I am interested in highlighting the various obstacles and successes that LGBTQ+ Protestants experience in navigating their identities and safeguarding their mental health. It is my hope that these findings can be used as suggestions for community leaders to create more inclusive religious and LGBTQ+ spaces.

¹ A Survey of LGBT Americans. Pew Research Center.

<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/#religion>, accessed October 8, 2018

² Fingerhut, Hannah, 2018

Support for Same-Sex Marriage Grows, Even Among Groups That Had Been Skeptical. Pew Research Center

<http://www.people-press.org/2017/06/26/support-for-same-sex-marriage-grows-even-among-groups-that-had-been-skeptical/>, accessed October 8, 2018

This presentation will focus on some of the preliminary findings from this project. Several patterns have been found. One of which is revealed through participants who have indicated that they experience discomfort in both LGBTQ+ and Protestant spaces almost equally. In LGBTQ+ spaces, individuals have described this discomfort coming from what they recognize as a valid distrust and sometimes even anger towards anyone who identifies as Christian. This pressure leads some individuals to avoid the LGBTQ+ community altogether or to feel like they need to defend their religion to others in the community. In Protestant spaces, individuals have described their discomfort as linked to being seen as sinners, and as a result, there is a fear and anxiety of being ostracized or the victim of physical, mental, and/or sexual violence. However, exceptions to this experience of discomfort have also been found for some individuals. These exceptions are often due to individuals joining progressive churches or are due to the age of participants. It is through patterns like these that indicate a need for LGBTQ+ Protestant experiences to be given more visibility and understanding, as individuals who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Protestant find rejection from both of the communities that claim to pride in their inclusivity. For communities that are truly interested in inclusivity, this study has many implications for building more inclusive communities.